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All the Screens That Control Us

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All the Screens That Control Us

Joerg Bader

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REFERENCES

Watched!: Surveillance, Art and Photography, Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2016

Byung-Chul Han, *Sauvons le beau : l'esthétique à l'ère numérique*, Arles: Actes Sud, 2016, (Questions de société)

Vivre par(mi) les écrans, Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2016, (Perceptions). Sous la dir. de Jacopo Bodini, Mauro Carbone, Anna Caterina Dalmaso

The Uses of Photography: Art, Politics, and the Reinvention of a Medium, San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego ; Oakland: University of California Press, 2016.

Sous la dir. de Jill Dawsey

- 1 Close up or from a distance, the control that cameras exercise in our digitalised societies is on the rise. In the past two or three years, exhibitions have been illustrating this phenomenon. Some of them connect self-portraits in the Western tradition to photography and the selfie, while others use the latter to target a self-centred generation. The ZKM of Karlsruhe devoted a whole series of exhibitions in 2015-2016 to control, censorship, the Infosphere, video games and other contemporary phenomenon under a generic title: *Globale*.
- 2 In their publication, *Liquid Surveillance: A Conversation* (Polity Press, 2012), Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon claim that selfies clearly partake in social control. In *Psychopolitique : le néolibéralisme et les nouvelles techniques de pouvoir* (Circé, 2016), Byung-Chul Han points to a change of paradigm. According to him, the concept of *panopticum*, Michel Foucault's metaphor of the control exercised by power, is no longer valid. This is particularly relevant insofar as we undergo constant control: wherever we go, the Internet, ATMs, border posts or the supermarket, we leave traces in the form of images,

numbers and text. According to the philosopher Byung-Chul Han, we happily participate in our own exploitation by feeding the Big Data companies. Our datas are their capital.

- 3 In *Sauvons le beau : l'esthétique à l'ère numérique*, Byung-Chul Han renews, in his captivating style¹, his thoughts on a world that is changing, thanks to or because of digital culture. He remarks that smoothness has taken over our lives², from the sculptures of Jeff Koons to Brazilian waxing (an observation that is echoed in *En attendant Godard*, a book by Zoé Bruneau, an actress who played in *Adieu au langage*, where she recounts how the filmmaker from Rolle lamented on hairless and smell-less contemporary women). According to Byung-Chul Han, “smoothness embodies the present *positive society*”. On Jeff Koons's sculptures, he notes that they are “devoid of all depth, of all profound meaning. [...] In front of his smooth sculptures, one is seized with a kind of haptic 'compulsion' that makes one want to touch or even suck on them. His art is devoid of the negativity which imposes a certain distance. It urges those who look at it to abandon all distance, to apprehend it through touch. However, an aesthetic judgement can only be formed on the condition of a *contemplative distance*, a distance which the art of smoothness abolishes.”³
- 4 Emphatic about disgust, he moves from Georges Bataille (“The object of disgust, as if it were not intolerable enough, escapes consumption.”⁴), to Theodor W. Adorno criticising Immanuel Kant's “auto-erotic approach of [his] definition of beauty” (p. 35), to finally arrive to “digital beauty”⁵ and its many different screens, all of them smooth. “The digital world is a world that people have, so to speak, directly fixed in the nets of their own retina. [...] The digital retina transforms the world into a (control) screen.”⁶ He concludes with an association worthy of Peter Sloterdijk: “The increasing volatility does no longer only concern financial markets, but society as a whole. Nothing lasts. Faced with this radical contingency, one notes the awakening of a desire for engagement, connection, beyond the everyday course of things.”⁷
- 5 In line with Byung-Chul Han, Mauro Carbone, who co-edited *Vivre par(mi) les écrans* with Anna Caterina Dalmaso and Jacopo Bodini, offers to create a “philosophy amongst and by screens”. Building on Marshall McLuhan, he describes the screen as a prosthesis to the body and, referring to Hidetaka Ishida, alludes to a “very different type of 'prosthesis' that is creating deep mutations that flood, in a more direct manner, the temporal aspect of our *dasein*.”⁸ To this effect, Mauro Carbone also quotes Richard Grusin, who noticed this tendency at work in the U.S. media after 9/11. He continues: “In short, today's media, analysed by Grusin, and the alarm systems described by Ishida perform a similar function: that of a *prosthesis* that we can only describe as temporal.”⁹ By giving further examples of what assails us everyday—content-transmitting screens in the metro, waiting rooms, in cafés and betting shops—he develops an interesting idea: “I do not claim that these therapeutic or prosthetic effects are in themselves an exclusive characteristic of the present times. Our times' distinctive feature is rather their connection and their self-representation as times of catastrophe, which was prepared by modernity's impregnation with a sense of human finitude, but especially by the belief in progress that was destroyed in Hiroshima by the culmination of progress itself.”¹⁰ Quoting Walter Benjamin, he points out that “screens have always been, at least since they entered the realm of entertainment, prostheses that develop our perception-memory-imagination-desire system.”¹¹
- 6 In the same proceedings of the international symposium, *Vivre par(mi) les écrans*, which was held in September 2014 at the Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3, Bernard Stiegler describes the screen not as a prosthesis but rather as a totem, a transitional object, or

even a fetish. He demonstrates, Orwell-style, how screens are no longer only the final points of transmission: with technical progress they are also able to record now. He mentions Jonathan Crary's recent book, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (Verso Books, 2013). This form of capitalism, which prevents us from sleeping and dreaming, could lead us to an unending extenuation, to a kind of hell. Bernard Stiegler admits he has imagined seeing hell around him.

- 7 However, according to Bernard Stiegler, there could be an alternative. He quotes Chris Anderson¹² who “argues [...] that algorithms and Big Data have in fact made science and experimental methods obsolete [...]. But this is so only because they establish a *de jure* performativity, that is all authority of all knowledge.”¹³ Bernard Stiegler views the idea of a semantic Web, introduced by Tim Berners-Lee, one of the inventors of the Internet, as a hope, on the condition that it should be based on a new concept of social networks, a normalised language of annotations and hermeneutic communities from different areas of knowledge.
- 8 In this rich volume of contributions, Richard Koczek examines screens in our cities, revealing that the facades of buildings are becoming “smart walls” or even screens. Dan Graham had already predicted this, over 25 years ago, in his *Cinema 81* project, which he never carried out. It would have been a street cinema, at the corner of an administrative building, made so that passers-by could have watched the movie, albeit upside-down and soundless. Richard Koczek shares Bernard Stiegler's view of screens, that we not only watch but that also watch us. He refers to the BBC report on Samsung *Smart TVs*, which are able to list our conversations. Don't smile, you're on camera!
- 9 *Watched! Surveillance: Art and Photography* is a large and seminal exhibition produced by the Hasselblad Foundation in Göteborg and then shown at the Kunsthall, the Galleri Image in Aarhus, and C/O in Berlin (until 21 May 2017). It examines the increase of surveillance, focusing on Northern Europe for reasons that remain mysterious, except inasmuch that Hasselblad cameras are manufactured at 57° 42' 0" North and that they can resist even polar temperatures.
- 10 This wide overview, developed by curator Louise Wolthers, includes 42 artists, including some who have already left their mark on the short history of surveillance: Hito Steyerl, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, Ai Weiwei and Trevor Paglen. The catalogue, rewarded by *Time Magazine*, is comprised of nine essays, including three truly remarkable pieces by James Bridle, Tom Holert and Peter Weibel. The latter put on the exhibition *CTRL Space: Rhetorik der Überwachung von Bentham bis Big Brother* at the ZKM in 2001.
- 11 In his essay “The Machine Sensorium”, James Bridle brilliantly demonstrates that contemporary and even digital images are only sums of information, as opposed to analogue recordings that capture the luminous reflections of a tangible reality. Using the Landsat pictures¹⁴ as examples, the artist, theoretician and activist notes that digital and technologically-enhanced images, with their strange, complex and beautiful, accessible yet remote, appearance, are entangled in the workings of the world, in its ethics and its self-understanding. James Bridle demonstrates how digital programmes for image treatment (facial recognition, etc), presented as scientifically neutral, are in fact loaded, to a large extent, with racist and sexist ideology.
- 12 Notions of surveillance are not predominant in the very instructive catalogue *The Uses of Photography: Art, Politics, and the Reinvention of a Medium* published by the Museum of Contemporary Art of San Diego and the University of California Press. It starts by

summarising the history of the San Diego art scene, that has not yet garnered as much attention as other Californian cities have in the past fifteen years. This is unsurprising, considering it is the most political scene on the West Coast, among other things because of its opposition to the Vietnam War and its feminist stance. This art scene appeared on the University of California San Diego campus, one of the newest campuses, created in 1960. Its art department opened in 1967 in what was, on account of its armaments industry and its naval base, one of the most conservative and militarised Californian cities.

- 13 The first people to teach there were, among others, Allan Kaprow, John Baldessari, Helen and Newton Mayer-Harrison, and Phil Steinmetz. His students, who later would also become professors there, were Fred Lonidier, Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula. They were among the more politicised students, following the classes of Herbert Marcuse and Fredric Jameson, and later would support future artists such as Eleanor Antin, Elizabeth Sisco, Carrie Mae Weems and the couple Helen and Newton Mayer-Harrison. All of them used photo and video cameras and they were the avant-garde from the end of the 1960s to the beginning of the 1980s.
- 14 In this lavishly illustrated catalogue, works by Fred Lonidier and Allan Sekula can be linked to the concept of surveillance. The latter, for instance, photographed plainclothes policemen that had infiltrated the last anti-Vietnam War protest, in *Red Squad (San Diego, 20 January 1973)*. For *Police Drawing (1971)*, John Baldessari, who was teaching a class as visiting professor, befriended a policeman. John Baldessari installed a video camera on a tripod in the classroom and left. A police draughtsman then drew a portrait of the disappeared professor from the indications of his students. The photograph which illustrates the cover of the catalogue, of which sadly only one half remains, belongs to the series *29 Arrests: Headquarters of the 11th Naval District, May 4, 1972*. Fred Lonidier had the nerve to stand behind the police who were photographing his friends being arrested, surrounded by armed police force. The faces of these long-haired young men and women are radiant with amusement, cheerfulness, even bliss and peace.

NOTES

1. Matthieu Dumont's translation recreates the dizziness or even the drunkenness one can feel while reading the German version of Byung-Chul Han's texts.
2. See the chapters "Du lisse" (p. 9-21), "Le corps lisse" (p. 23-27) and "Esthétique du lisse" (p. 29-38)
3. Han, Byung-Chul. "Du lisse", *Sauvons le beau : l'esthétique à l'ère numérique*, Arles : Actes Sud, 2016, (Questions de société), p. 11
4. Han, Byung-Chul. *Op. cit.*, p. 19
5. See the chapter "Le Beau numérique", *ibid.*, p. 39-43
6. *Ibid.*, p. 43
7. Han, Byung-Chul. "Engendrer dans le beau", *Op. cit.*, p. 114
8. Carbone, Mauro. « Faire de la philosophie parmi les écrans. » *Vivre par(mi) les écrans*, Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2016, (Perceptions), p. 258. Ed. by Jacopo Bodini, Mauro Carbone, Anna Caterina Dalmaso

9. Carbone, Mauro. *Op. cit.*, p. 260-261
10. *Ibid.*, p. 266
11. *Ibid.*, p. 267
12. The editor of *Wired*, a journal in which, in 2008, he published the controversial article “The End of Theory”.
13. Stiegler, Bernard. « L’écran d’écriture », *Vivre par(mi) les écrans*, *Op. cit.*, p. 25
14. The first civilian Earth-observation program. It was developed by NASA.